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ZNR UUUUU ZZH (CCY ADAADB4C MSI8947 611)
O 181732Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6587
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHMR/AMCONSUL MARSEILLE PRIORITY 1670
RUEHSR/AMCONSUL STRASBOURG PRIORITY 0398

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 001566

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DEPT ALSO FOR EUR/WE,DRL/IL,INR/EUC,EUR/ERA,EUR/PPD,
AND EB
DEPT OF COMMERCE FOR ITA
DEPT OF LABOR FOR ILAB

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y--PARA 2, LINE 12--"1962" VICE "1969"
DEPT OF LABOR FOR ILAB

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [EU](#) [FR](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#)

SUBJECT: THE ABC'S OF FRANCE'S APRIL 22 AND MAY 6
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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11. (U) SUMMARY: The French presidential election is a single, national election in two rounds; it is, above all, a personal election by universal, direct suffrage absent reference to party affiliation. France's voters (except for the small portion that will use electronic voting machines) will choose by depositing a piece of paper bearing their preferred candidate's name into the ballot box at 56,000 different polling stations. The first round of the election will take place Sunday, April 22; the second round will take place Sunday, May 6. A record 44.5 million citizens are registered to vote in this election, and a record turn-out -- possibly as high as 85 percent -- is anticipated. Election results (barring near ties in vote totals) will be known by about 8 p.m. on each election day, extrapolated from the results at a representative set of polling stations. France's Constitutional Council will ratify the final results of each round. The president-elect and the out-going president are free to arrange for the transfer of power anytime between the Constitutional Council's formal promulgation of the results of the May 6 second-round elections and the May 16 expiration at midnight of the outgoing president's term of office. END SUMMARY.

A SINGLE, NATIONAL AND PERSONAL ELECTION

12. (U) French political operatives vaunt the "democratic directness and simplicity" of presidential elections in a centralized state such as France, as opposed to the complicated system in place in the United States. This is so despite the fact that the election process features two rounds, a plethora of candidates in the first round (12 this year), and the complications of equal time provisions and campaign finance ceilings. The features that the French identify as making their presidential election process distinctive are that it is "single, national and personal": single because election day is dedicated to deciding the occupant of a single, national office (the presidency); national because the electorate is that of a single, national constituency (all French citizens, in France and abroad); and personal because it involves a rendezvous between an individual and the people, as intended by General De Gaulle, who changed the French constitution in 1962 to elect the president by "direct, universal suffrage."

PROCEDURAL UNIFORMITY

13. (U) These features of France's presidential electoral process are reflected in the physical voting process. The ballots only have the names of the candidates written on them, without any political affiliation. The ballots -- hardly surprisingly in a highly centralized state with a bias towards imposing uniformity in the interest of promoting equality -- will be almost exactly the same throughout the 56,000 polling places in metropolitan France, its overseas territories, and French consulates abroad. (Three percent of voters will use electronic voting devices -- see below).

RECORD REGISTRATIONS SUGGEST RECORD TURNOUT

14. (U) Never have so many French been registered to vote. Almost 44.5 million citizens have signed up for the 2007 presidential and legislative elections, an increase of 3.3 million over the number of registered voters in the last presidential election year (2002), and the highest registration rate since the watershed presidential election of 1981. Voter turnout in the first round of presidential elections had been steadily declining since 1974, with the abstention rate peaking at 28.4 percent of registered voters in 2002. Analysts believe voters will turn out in record numbers this year, with the predicted abstention rate ranging from 15-20 percent for the first round.

AMONG THE YOUNG AND THOSE LIVING ABROAD

15. (U) This year there has been an exceptional surge in voter registration among young people living in poor, immigrant neighborhoods, an official Interior Ministry report notes. While much press coverage has focused on the possible impact of these first-time voters, urban youths among them, the largest percentage increase in fact occurred among French citizens living overseas. According to Interior Ministry figures: 43,973,024 voters are registered in metropolitan France and its overseas territories, with an additional 535,000 voters registered in consulates in foreign countries. But the 535,000 figure does not take into account an

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additional 285,000 voters who live overseas but are still carried on local registration rolls in France. By these calculations, a total of 820,000 French voters live overseas in 2007, an increase of 160,000 (24 percent) over 2006.

56,000 POLLING PLACES

16. (U) Voting in the first round will begin in the overseas French Territories in the western hemisphere on April 21, a day before the remainder of the French electorate begins voting on April 22. Organized by the Ministry of the Interior, the voting will be held in some 56,000 local polling stations, each serving a maximum of 800-1000 registered voters. After providing proof of registration, voters receive an envelope and a ballot for each candidate (12 in the first round and 2 in the second). They then proceed to a isolated voting booth where they place the ballot of their preferred candidate into the envelope. Voters then place the envelope into a ballot box which is under the constant supervision of election officials and political party observers. Voters sign a list before exiting the polling station to prove they have voted.

LIMITED ELECTRONIC VOTING

17. (U) This year marks the first trial of electronic voting in French presidential elections. Electronic voting has been approved for towns with more than 3,500 registered voters. About 3 percent of the French electorate, or 1.5 million voters in 82 different localities, are expected to vote electronically in 2007. However, both the centrist candidate Francois Bayrou and some Socialist Party politicians have

called for a moratorium on voting electronically, citing risks of fraud and error.

COUNTING THE VOTES

18. (U) On election day the polling stations close at 6 or 8 P.M. at the discretion of local officials. Counting begins immediately thereafter, under the supervision of locally appointed commissions which include representatives from each candidate. For towns with more than one polling station, a special committee centralizes the tallies and checks them against the lists of registered voters. The local totals are then called in to the Interior Ministry where they are added to the national tally. Local officials are banned from dealing with irregularities or complaints, and are also prohibited from releasing any results or projections until the polls have closed in all locations.

UNOFFICIAL RESULTS STARTING AT 8 P.M.

19. (U) On election day French media outlets are prohibited from disseminating unofficial projections until after the polls close. The applicable law prohibits "publication, commentary and dissemination by any means of any polls on the eve and on the day of the election." However, estimates by polling organizations or purported leaks of the counts coming in to the Interior Ministry could begin circulating (on web sites based outside of France and by SMS text messages) hours earlier. A number of well-known commentators have vowed to defy the law this year and post, on their political blogs based in France, the preliminary estimates circulating in media and political circles. At 8 P.M. mainstream media will disseminate the first estimate of the national results. This unofficial "exit poll" (compiled by public opinion survey companies) is normally very accurate, except in the case of a close race. This year the Interior Ministry is expected to begin posting the official local results on its website at about 9 P.M. All results are expected to have been tallied and posted by 3 A.M. the next morning. The Interior Ministry will also disseminate, soon after 8 P.M., a tally of results from a group of selected polling places that model the electorate at large.

OFFICIAL RESULTS FOR SECOND ROUND WITHIN DAYS

10. (U) France's Constitutional Council reviews and ratifies all election results; it is the final arbiter in all election disputes. The Council is expected to publish a breakdown of the official results on its website by no later than 8 P.M. on Wednesday, April 25. The official ballot for the second round of elections will be released on Friday, April 27.

SAME PROCEDURES FOR SECOND ROUND

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11. (U) The second round of voting will begin in France's departments and territories in the western hemisphere on May 5, but voters in France will go to the polls on Sunday, May 6. As with the first round, an unofficial exit poll will be released at 8 P.M. that night. The Interior Ministry will then make an unofficial declaration of the winner on Monday, May 7. The official winner must be declared by the Constitutional Council within four days of the election, that is, by Thursday, May 12.

HANDOVER OF POWER

12. (U) Article 6 of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic reads "The President of the Republic is elected for five years by direct, universal suffrage." One result of this is that the start of the incoming President's term is determined by the end of the outgoing President's term. President Chirac's first term was officially declared ended as of midnight May 16, 2002 by the Constitutional Council when it announced the results of 2002's second round. Five years

later is midnight Wednesday, May 16, 2007. The transfer of power between Chirac and his successor then must happen in the interim between the Constitutional Council's declaration of the second round winner (which it is required by law to declare within four days of the election) and the end of Chirac's term. The incoming and outgoing presidents are free to arrange for the transfer of power between them anytime during that period. Many observers suspect that the inauguration of the new president might take place over the week-end of May 12-13, but it could take place as late as Wednesday, May 16.

INAUGURATING THE WINNER

13. (U) The inauguration consists of a brief ceremony at the Elysee Palace at which the election results are read out, pursuant to which the new president signs a decree beginning his or her term of office. It is customary for the new president then to proceed to France's tomb of the unknown soldier at the Arc of Triumph, lay a wreath as Commander in Chief, and then return to the presidential palace via a small parade down the Champs-Elysees. These inaugural ceremonies have not, in the past, included any role for high-level foreign government representatives. Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

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